

Israel Steps Up Operations in Gaza

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Israeli naval commandos killed four Palestinian militants off the coast of Gaza yesterday morning in an operation designed by the Israeli government to send a signal to the Palestinian people and the world—that its illegal blockade of the territory will continue despite mounting criticism following the May 31 massacre of nine Turkish activists.

The latest Palestinians killed were reportedly members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, wearing diving suits while on board a boat in waters off Gaza's Nureirat refugee camp at 4.30 a.m. The Israeli military claimed that the men were attempting to carry out a terrorist attack. The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade denied this, however, reporting that the men were members of its "marine unit" and were training.

While details of the incident are still emerging, Israeli forces appear to have made little or no effort to detain rather than kill the Palestinians. The four bodies were retrieved from the Mediterranean Sea and taken to a hospital in central Gaza. Palestinian health official Moawiya Hassanain told Haaretz that two of the dead had suffered multiple gunshot wounds to the head.

The Israeli troops involved were from the elite Shayetet 13 unit, which was responsible for the bloody raid of the Mavi Marmara aid vessel. An unnamed military official told Israel's Army Radio: "This will be a shot in the arm for the commandos after the hard week they have been through."

This remark is indicative of the complete disregard for international law on the part of both the Israeli military and government. The Zionist state is increasingly isolated internationally, at the same time as it is being wracked by severe internal social and political crises. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's unstable coalition government largely rests upon the support of the military establishment as well as right-wing settlers and their supporters. The government-ordered attack on the aid flotilla, and its subsequent intransigent rejection of any criticism of what happened, underscores the criminality and recklessness of Israeli foreign policy.

Netanyahu has refused to countenance an international inquiry into the Mavi Marmara aid vessel killings. "We don't want a problematic precedent to be set here for future events," the prime minister bluntly declared, tacitly admitting that further Israeli crimes against the Palestinians were inevitable.

Netanyahu told a meeting of Likud cabinet members on Sunday that his government would not agree to a "Goldstone-like" inquiry of the raid. This referred to the UN investigation conducted into Israel's three-week bombardment of Gaza in 2008-2009 which concluded

that war crimes had been committed. The inquiry increased the pressure on senior Israeli politicians, many of whom now are wary of travelling to Europe for fear of being arrested.

Several senior officials have sought to secure Washington's support for their opposition to an inquiry by raising the spectre of American political and military leaders facing investigation for their criminal activities. Defence Minister Ehud Barak told a meeting of Labor ministers: "Do the Americans establish a committee of inquiry every time things happen in Afghanistan?" Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the US told "Fox News Sunday": "Israel has the ability and the right to investigate itself, not to be investigated by any international board. I don't think the United States would want an international inquiry into its military activities in Afghanistan, for example."

President Barack Obama's administration has functioned as Israel's key accomplice throughout the crisis triggered by the Gaza aid flotilla attack. Having worked to defuse the situation in the United Nations last week, Washington is now preparing to endorse an internal Israeli investigation into the Mavi Marmara raid.

The Israeli Defence Forces announced yesterday that it is formally investigating the incident. In addition, Haaretz has reported that Netanyahu will soon announce a "state panel of inquiry", comprising senior Israeli judges, with two international justices, at least one being American, to serve as observers. According to the newspaper, Netanyahu decided that "the panel would not be allowed to interrogate soldiers or officers who took part in the commando raid". Unnamed senior American officials have been discussing forming an "investigative committee" involving Israeli and Turkish representatives—they told Haaretz that "a suitable mandate must be created in which Israeli soldiers are not questioned".

Any Israeli investigation of what happened will be nothing but a whitewash. The question can be raised—if the government's story that the Israeli commandos did nothing wrong and acted in self defence against "terrorists" is true, why can the soldiers involved not be questioned? The shielding of the commandos is further evidence of a cover up, consistent with the actions of the troops themselves aboard the aid vessel, when they confiscated all the activists' cameras and recording devices.

The Israeli government propaganda machine has also been mobilised in response to mounting international scrutiny of the situation inside Gaza—Netanyahu and his colleagues have brazenly asserted that there is no humanitarian crisis. In reality, the Palestinian territory is among the most impoverished regions of the world. As a result of the Israeli blockade, Gaza effectively functions as an enormous prison.

The official unemployment rate is a staggering 44 percent, 80 percent of the population is dependent on food and income aid, and the number of those defined as "abject poor", that is those unable to feed themselves or their families, has risen from about 100,000 to 300,000 in the past twelve months. Per capita gross domestic product plunged from \$2,500 in 1998-99 to just \$600 last year.

The limited industrial production that was previously developed in Gaza has collapsed due to the prohibition of basic machinery and component imports, while the agricultural sector is in crisis due to the Israeli ban on exports. Basic consumer goods beyond what is provided by the UN and aid agencies are only available at exorbitant prices, having been smuggled in

through dangerous underground tunnels to Egypt.

Gaza's 1.5 million people are the victims of a barbaric collective punishment inflicted by the Israeli state. In Palestinian Authority elections staged in January 2006, the Fatah candidates that were favoured and funded by Israel and the US lost to Hamas. Israel, the US, and Europe responded by freezing all Palestinian Authority funds, triggering a collapse in basic services and governmental infrastructure in both Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time, Washington spearheaded covert preparations for an anti-Hamas coup, providing money and weapons to elements within Fatah. These manoeuvres triggered the internecine fighting between the Palestinian factions in June 2007, with Hamas routing Fatah in Gaza. Israel and the US responded by cynically accusing the Islamic fundamentalists of staging an unlawful seizure of power.

Then followed "Operation Cast Lead", Israel's assault on Gaza in December 2008 to January 2009, killing more than 1,400 Palestinians and making another 20,000 homeless. The criminal assault targeted basic social infrastructure, including power stations, water and sewage stations, hospitals and schools. A report issued last month by the UN Development Programme, "One Year After: Gaza Early Recovery and Reconstruction Needs Assessment", found that just 25 percent of the infrastructure damage inflicted during the war has been restored.

"The blockade has been a major obstacle to repairing the damage done by Israeli air attacks and destruction," the report concluded. "Nearly none of the 3,425 homes destroyed during Cast Lead have been reconstructed, displacing around 20,000 people. Only 17.5 percent of the value of the damages to educational facilities has been repaired, putting extra strain on Gaza's already stressed education system where schools have been teaching two shifts of pupils per day for decades.

"Repairs of infrastructure have also been held back. Only half of the damage to the power network has been repaired, which continues to contribute to significant electricity cuts; no repair has been made to the transport infrastructure. In the economic sector, a quarter of damaged farmland has been rehabilitated and only 40 percent of private businesses have been repaired. The fishing industry has been almost completely destroyed by ongoing Israeli restrictions on fishing limits. A closer look reveals that the infrastructure which remains unrepaired is often that which is most essential to the basic needs and well-being of the Gaza population. The repair of the severely damaged Al-Wafa and Al-Quds Hospitals has been delayed by the lack of materials, with work on the latter only starting in February 2010."

The Israeli government has deliberately created this crisis in order to constrict the ability of the Hamas-led administration to govern Gaza and to undermine its political support from the population. Netanyahu and his colleagues are entirely indifferent to the enormous suffering they are inflicting on Palestinian civilians in order to advance their political objectives. In similar fashion, as the Mavi Marmara raid demonstrated, they have no qualms about killing aid workers and activists in order to maintain the Gaza blockade.

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